



Improvising in Clave  
By Michael Philip Mossman  
Aaron Copland School of Music - Queens College/CUNY

“Clave is a dance partner, not a tyrant.”

Command of the natural accents in a rhythm groove is as much a mark of a good improviser as command of the harmony. Both rhythm and harmony function to create the tension and release that provide the forward “push” to music. Gaining proficiency in jazz improvisation in clave starts by building melodic lines that hit points in the subdivided beats within a (usually) two-bar cell that correspond to the major accents of clave. (Here we will deal with Afro-Cuban clave, although there are many others... even a shuffle rhythm has clave!) This is analogous to building lines over a given chord progression, connecting key guide tones (3rds and 7ths), chordal extensions and alterations that allow lines to tell the same “story” as the chord progression.

Playing in clave doesn’t mean only following the given accents slavishly, however! The results of this would be limited, too predictable and boring, creatively. Just as playing improvised lines that adhere completely to the chords can sound too “pedantic” so always hitting the same accents each two bars would lead to dull results. Both playing “outside” the harmony and rhythm require a complete understanding of these basic materials. In this way an improviser can pull against the fabric of the rhythm and harmony and then RESOLVE convincingly. Therein lies the “DANCE” which makes clave such a great partner for jazz improvisation.

Ever watch a couple of 10 year olds at their first middle school dance, locked rigidly together in rhythmic unison as they revolve slowly around and around? That is what we wish to avoid when learning to play in clave. Equally unsatisfying, however, is the dance partner who seems to forget that they are dancing with a partner at all. In this case each person has their own rhythm and motion, utterly disconnected with the other. This is similar to what happens when improvisers play in an unfamiliar groove with only their preconceived licks and techniques on their minds. The rhythm section is only a metronome and the only relevant time is the beat, not the subdivisions, accents or other elements of style. Jazz improvisation is a group activity (even a solo instrument engages the audience!) and when there is a “conversation” based on the basic structural materials of the song, stylistic elements of groove, personal and cultural interaction, historical references, etc. That’s when we get great results!

Part of these interactions is tension. Musicians and audiences alike can feel it and this animates the music. Tito Puente was known for sections in his mambo recordings (take Ran Kan Kan as an example) that included cyclical rhythmic patterns, often groups of 3 beats against 4 that cycled in and out of clave, creating tension that was released after a number of bars. To add to the tension he also added harmonic dissonance, building to a crescendo of tension and eventual release. Dancers, mostly without any technical knowledge of why, were thrilled by these sections and these charts, first performed in the 1950's, still sound fresh today.

The tension and release depends on the coordination of the musicians: some maintaining the groove and others pulling against it, much like trapeze artists. Meet you 8 bars from now... don't be late!

Yet another aspect of playing in specifically Afro-Cuban styles is the presence of multiple percussion instruments. This makes articulation an essential part of interaction. Percussion instruments have an immediate attack and synchronizing with them necessitates adjusting the release of sound such that notes don't sound too late to match rhythmic accents in the percussion.

The musical handout included in this workshop will illustrate a few of these techniques, both rhythmic and harmonic. Playing in clave is not just about rhythm! Different grooves have both traditional harmonic languages and variations on them, evolved over time, such as those of Perez Prado vs those of Eddie Palmieri. We'll look at a few of these here as well.